

AIR WAR COLLEGE
AIR UNIVERSITY

U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM, 1964 - 1968

BY

**Ray T. "Tom" Garza
Lieutenant Colonel, USAF**

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE CURRICULUM

REQUIREMENT

Advisor: Dr. Robert L. Wendzel

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

April 1995

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 3

DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A

Approved for public release;
Distribution Unlimited

19970902 116

DISCLAIMER

This study represents the views of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Air War College or the Department of the Air Force. In accordance with Air Force Regulation 110-8, it is not copyrighted, but is the property of the United States government.

Loan copies of this document may be obtained through the interlibrary loan desk of Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, 36112-5564, (telephone [334] 953-7223 or DSN 493-7223).

ABSTRACT

TITLE: U.S. Involvement in Vietnam, 1964-1968

AUTHOR: Ray T. Garza, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

The Vietnam War is unique in the evolution of United States National Strategy following World War II. The Strategy of Containment of Communism and the concept eventually known as the Domino Theory governed United States National Policy in Vietnam. The United States had to resist communist expansion in the world because this expansion had as its ultimate expression the destruction of freedom loving democracies world wide. This paper will examine the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam from 1964-1968, particularly the evolution of national policy and objectives. The paper will also identify and analyze the major concepts and principles guiding U.S. policy in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968. It will begin with the period immediately before President Johnson's decision to increase U. S. military involvement in the war in 1965. The paper will end with Johnson's decision to halt the bombing of North Vietnam following the February 1968 Tet offensive. Linkage to the containment strategy largely dominated the initial decisions to escalate the war. Bureaucratic politics and counterbalancing national objectives influenced continued involvement through March 1968. Finally, the paper demonstrates that the Johnson Administration could not discard the original containment paradigm in Vietnam. The cost for this unchanging policy was the administration's end.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Ray T. Garza (BA, Political Science, St. Mary's University, and MA, Webster University) served in the Pacific Theater on two separate assignments. From December 1978 to December 1979 he was assigned to Osan AB, Republic of South Korea during the crisis involving the assassination of President Park Chung Hee. From May 1986 to July 1989, he was assigned to HQ Pacific Air Forces at Hickam AFB, HI, directorate of plans. In this capacity, he managed foreign military sales programs for both North and South Asia. He has traveled extensively throughout Asia in support of his duties. He served with the United States Central Command Operations Staff, Riyadh Saudi Arabia, from August 1990 to April 1991 and was awarded the Bronze Star Medal. In 1994 Lt Col Garza flew 26 combat support missions as Airborne Warning and Control (AWACS) Mission Crew Commander in Operations Southern Watch and Provide Comfort. During these missions, he enforced "no fly" zones over southern and northern Iraq respectively. He is a graduate of the Armed Forces Staff College, Class 86.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DISCLAIMER	i
ABSTRACT	ii
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	iii
Chapters:	
I. Introduction	1
II. 1964 to 1965 Decision to Escalate	4
Containment and Flexible Response	4
Johnson Escalates	7
Hartmann and Wendzel's Cardinal Principles Applied	9
Past Future Linkages	9
Counterbalancing National Interests	10
Third Party Influences	12
Conservation of Enemies	13
Summing Up	13
III. 1966-1967 Gradual Escalation	15
Vietnam and the "Great Society," Counterbalancing Interests	15
Waging War	16
The Home Front	18
Decision Making	21
Summing Up	24
IV. The 1968 Tet Offensive and Johnson's Decision	26
The Cauldron	26
Tet Fractures the Paradigm	27
Summing Up	29
V. Conclusion	30
Reference List	34
Appendix - Cardinal Principles	35

Section I

Introduction

Studies of the Vietnam War are many and for very good reasons. This war turned out to be America's longest war with a huge commitment of men and matériel, but most consider it a failure for the United States. The Vietnam War resulted in the deaths of more than 50,000 Americans and a serious loss of national prestige. To this day, many U.S. policy makers refer to the experience in Vietnam as a caution against ill-advised intervention. Vietnam had a profound and negative effect on America's view of the military. It was not until Desert Storm that the military regained the trust of the American people. Much of the success in Desert Storm is the result of hard lessons learned in Vietnam by military and civilian leadership alike. For that and many other reasons, it is important to study the Vietnam War today.

Perhaps no other event, except the American Civil War did so much to raise America's consciousness, and indeed ire, as the Vietnam War. Unlike World War II, the Vietnam War did not create a national emergency that united all Americans in a common cause. World War II threatened national survival and therefore, was a much simpler war. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, there was no doubt that Japan was an enemy. Germany also became a clear threat to the United States and its allies when it declared war on America following Pearl Harbor. Pearl Harbor finally caused an isolationist United States to become involved in the war that had been waging in Europe since the 1930's.

The Korean War, like Vietnam lacked a sense of clarity. Korea is an important example of a war that did not threaten the United States' vital interests. Therefore, both Korea and Vietnam presented policy making challenges not present in World War II.

(4:vii) As stated by Dr. Larry Cable, author of *The Unholy Grail*:

The Vietnam War was a limited war in support of policy. In this it resembled the Korean conflict. However, the Vietnam War differed in character from its immediate predecessor. It combined aspects of

conventional and guerrilla war. It mixed insurgency with partisan conflict. It had a chameleon appearance as its character changed several times between 1964 and 1968. As a result, the formulation of a goal, the definition of victory and the development of a theory of victory placed greater demands upon the policy makers and military commanders of the Johnson Administration (4:vii-viii)

Containment of communism was the policy that governed U. S. actions in both Korea and Vietnam. To many Americans, communism in Asia did not pose a direct threat to the United States as did World War II or the Cold War in Europe. This led to less sustained support for the Vietnam War. In a sense Vietnam was a proxy war in which the United States was fighting an enemy other than Vietnam. Although he had no official policymaking position at the time, Richard Nixon fully expressed the rationale for the war while addressing the Commonwealth Club of California on April 2, 1965:

Today the most difficult decision facing President Johnson is South Vietnam, the most difficult decision he will make during his Presidency, I believe, at home or abroad. And it is the most important decision for the United States and the free world . . . This is a confrontation--not fundamentally between Vietnam and the Vietcong or between the United States and the Vietcong--but between the United States and Communist China. This must not be glossed over because if we gloss it over we underestimate the risks and do not understand the stakes. (6:104)

Nixon went on to say that if South Vietnam fell [to communism], so would Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma and Indonesia. Nixon also believed guerilla activity in the Philippines could lead to communist domination there, and eventually threaten Japan. (6:105) This was the focus and point of view that dominated the United States paradigm for national security policy and decision making concerning Vietnam.

This essay will examine the history of United States' Vietnam involvement from 1964 through 1968. It will emphasize the evolution of the national policy objectives during that period. One aim of the paper is to examine President Johnson's decision to escalate the war and the national strategy concerning Vietnam during 1964-1965. In Section II the genesis of the containment strategy and the Domino Theory is articulated. In addition, several key factors leading to the decision to escalate are assessed using a modified version of Hartmann and Wendzel's Cardinal Principles. (10:35) Section III will focus on the events of 1966 and 1967 and attempt to explain the gradual escalation of the war that

occurred during that period. Section IV outlines the initial months of 1968, especially the critical period of the Tet offensive of February 1968. Also examined are the events leading to the decision by President Johnson to cease bombing in North Vietnam and his decision not to seek reelection in March 1968. Section V will attempt to draw conclusions and answer the "so what" questions about United States involvement in Vietnam.

The serious student of American history must understand the United States' Vietnam involvement because it defined the national outlook for the last 30 plus years. Similarly, the professional military officer should study Vietnam for its lessons on United States national decision making in military situations short of general war. These limited military situations, or even more limited ones as with respect to Somalia and Haiti more recently, are likely to recur in the near term. Understanding the major concepts and principles guiding United States' policy in Vietnam between 1964 and 1968, will better prepare the nation and its military for the uncertainties that lie ahead. This paper is an attempt to aid in this understanding.

Section II

1964-1965: Decision to Escalate

Containment and Flexible Response

To understand United States' strategy in Vietnam, one must first understand the broader national strategy and its genesis. This general strategy was one of containment of communism. Containment was not new in 1964 and 1965. It originated in the years following World War II. George Kennan's famous eight thousand word telegram from Moscow to the United States in February 1946 laid the foundation and had profound implications for U.S. strategic thinking. (7:19) This telegram was sent while Kennan was serving in Moscow as minister-counselor in the United States Embassy. Kennan was one of the State Department's first trained Russian experts. (7:14) As John Gaddis wrote in his *Strategies of Containment*, Rarely in the course of diplomacy is it given to one individual to express, within the compass of a single document, ideas of such force and persuasion that they immediately change the direction of a nation's foreign policy. That was the effect, though, of the 8,000 word telegram dispatched from Moscow by Kennan on February 22, 1946. (7:19) The telegram was extremely well received in Washington because it offered an explanation and rationale for the uncooperative and competitive behavior of the Soviet Union (a World War II ally) in Europe. In fact, the telegram did more than offer an explanation for the Soviet departure from cordial cooperation. It provided the guiding principles that United States' leaders sought as guidance for their actions toward the Soviets--containment. (10:206) George Kennan's telegram planted the seed for the idea that established the Soviet Union as a communist threat to world democracy. Kennan saw the Soviet Union as an internally insecure and paranoid country that viewed the outside world as a hostile threat. As a result, the Soviets ruled themselves ruthlessly and autocratically and did not compromise or negotiate unless it served their interests. (7:20)

The Soviets, he wrote, saw the world as split into capitalist and socialist

camps, between which there could be no peaceful coexistence. They would try to do everything possible to strengthen the socialist camp, while at the same time working to divide and weaken capitalist nations. In time, capitalism would collapse because of its own internal contradictions and socialism would rise to take its place. Kennan emphasized that the Russians had not arrived at this analysis from an objective study of conditions outside the Soviet Union. Rather, it stemmed from the Kremlin leaders need to justify their autocratic rule--a need Russian rulers had felt for centuries. . . . The implications of Kennan's analysis were ominous. If Soviet foreign policy was formulated not in response to what happened in the rest of the world but solely as a result of conditions within Russia, then no action of the United States, no matter how well intentioned, could bring about any diminution of hostility toward the West. (8:302-303)

Because of this belief, the United States had to deal with the Soviets firmly and resist their attempts to spread communist influence globally. This view prompted Kennan to write *The Sources of Soviet Conduct*, an article that he wrote and signed Mr. X to remain anonymous. He introduced the term "containment" in this article written for *Foreign Affairs*. After Kennan was identified as the author, the document received official status.

(7:25-26)

The long telegram and the *Foreign Affairs'* article essentially produced the cold war paradigm that guided U. S. - Soviet relations until 1991 and the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to John Gaddis, "Finally, and most dramatically, the new strategy manifested itself in the Truman Doctrine, in . . . what appeared to be a worldwide commitment to resist Soviet expansionism wherever it appeared." (7:22) Not surprisingly, the "loss" of mainland China to communism in 1949, and the Korean war that followed, caused the United States to view the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a monolithic communist bloc bent on world domination.

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations adopted their own version of containment. Kennedy described it as follows:

'[T]he interest of the United States of America . . . is best served by preserving and protecting a world of diversity in which no power or no one combination of powers can threaten the security of the United States . . . [I]f

neither Russia nor China could control Europe and Asia, . . . [T]hen our security was assured . . . ' There was, thus, 'one simple central theme of American foreign policy . . . and that is to support the independence of nations so that one bloc cannot gain sufficient power to finally overcome us.' (7:201)

The requirement to achieve this national policy objective led Kennedy to the strategy of **Flexible Response**. Flexible response was a shift toward a national military strategy that allowed for handling national crises with a diverse set of tools. These tools included political, economic, diplomatic and military actions. (7:232) Militarily, this strategy was a significant departure from Eisenhower's **Massive Retaliation Strategy** (which Kennedy saw as grossly inadequate) because it recognized the need for graduated and flexible military responses to situations short of all-out nuclear war. Flexible response provided a means of obtaining national policy objectives gradually so as not to rely solely on immediate and dangerous escalation. Kennedy outlined the objectives of **Flexible Response** as follows: "[T]o deter all wars, general or limited, nuclear or conventional, large or small--to convince all potential aggressors that any attack would be futile--to provide backing for the diplomatic settlement of disputes--to insure the adequacy of our bargaining power for an end to the arms race." (7:214) Vietnam became a fair test of flexible response as viewed by Kennedy and his advisors. (7:237) After the death of President Kennedy in November 1963, Lyndon Johnson retained the strategy of flexible response.

Johnson Escalates

The Kennedy administration initiated no massive military involvement in Vietnam and had instead provided economic aid and a limited number of advisors. The main objective was to maintain a free and independent government of South Vietnam. This supported containment by preventing the South Vietnamese government from falling to communism as had the government of the People's Republic of China. Extrapolated from this proposition was the proposition that if Vietnam fell it would create a "domino effect" in Asia. Moreover, other countries like Malaya and the Philippines could be next. Nevertheless, in 1963 when Lyndon Johnson became president he focused mainly on his Great Society programs and left the handling of Vietnam almost exclusively to Secretary of Defense McNamara. As we shall see later in this work, Johnson's involvement in Vietnam would increase. (9:97)

Conventional wisdom asserts that beginning with the Gulf of Tonkin crisis in August 1964; President Johnson started the process toward U.S. escalation in Vietnam. Neil Sheehan offers the following view:

The Pentagon papers disclose that for six months before the Tonkin Gulf incident in August, 1964, the United States had been mounting clandestine military attacks against North Vietnam while planning to obtain a Congressional resolution that the Administration regarded as the equivalent of a declaration of war. When the incident occurred, the Johnson Administration did not reveal these clandestine attacks and pushed the previously prepared resolution through both houses of congress [sic] on Aug. 7. (15:234)

On August 2, 1964, two North Vietnamese patrol boats attacked the destroyer U. S. S. *Maddox*. As a result, President Johnson ordered punitive air strikes (code name: Pierce Arrow) on North Vietnamese ports, naval facilities and petroleum. (9:101-102) Following this, Congress passed the Southeast Asia Resolution (or Tonkin Gulf Resolution) which "authorized the President to take vigorous measures to protect American forces and came to be regarded by the administration as the functional equivalent of a declaration of war . . .

.. " (9:102) Again, Congress was unaware of the clandestine attacks that had been going on against North Vietnam before the *Maddox* episode.

Despite the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the Johnson administration remained hesitant to increase the use of force in Vietnam. Facing the elections of November 1964, Johnson sought the moderate approach to distinguish him from his Republican opponent Barry Goldwater, a strong advocate of bombing North Vietnam. (15:307) On August 29, 1964, Johnson expressed restraint in a Texas address by outlining U.S. policy as follows: [T]o furnish advice, give counsel, express good judgment, give them trained counselors, and help them with equipment to help themselves. (15:311) Even the attacks on Bienhoa Airfield near Saigon (two days before the November 1 elections) did not prompt retaliatory action from Johnson because he feared U. S. retaliation might cause North Vietnamese or Chinese counter retaliation. The Vietcong attack on Bienhoa had killed five Americans and destroyed five B-57 aircraft. (15:320-322)

In February 1965, however, the attacks on U. S. advisors at Pleiku and a helicopter base at Camp Holloway were significant catalysts for escalation. (9:117) These attacks directly led to the Rolling Thunder Bombing Campaign against North Vietnam. Once U. S. aircraft started bombing North Vietnam from Da Nang Air Base, General Westmoreland (COMUSMACV) requested troops to secure the air base. Consequently, the deployment of 3,500 marines on 8 March 1965, began the introduction of substantial ground combat forces. (9:120) This fact is significant because the introduction of ground troops was given less deliberation than was the initial decision to conduct air strikes. It is also ironic because the introduction of ground forces represented more tangible and protracted national commitment. (9:120) Vietcong successes in South Vietnam and continued inability of the South Vietnamese government to deal with the situation also argued for escalation/Americanization. By June 1965, there were 75,000 U. S. troops in Vietnam. On July 8, the president ordered an increase in troop strength to 125,000 (including the 1st Cavalry Division). The president also authorized an increase in troop strength to 219,000

by November 1965. (9:129) This was a quick and dramatic increase and one that would eventually grow to over 500,000 by 1968. Escalation did not occur without substantial debate. The following section will discuss some issues involved in the decision to escalate.

Cardinal Principles Applied

This section focuses on several reasons or rationale for Johnson's decision to escalate the war. As stated in the introduction this discussion will use a modified version of Frederick Hartmann and Robert Wendzel's Cardinal Principles to examine the decision to escalate. Past future linkages, third party influences, counter balancing national interests and conservation of enemies affected the escalation decision. (See Appendix for explanation of the principles). (10:35)

Past Future Linkages

Johnson's perception of history had a definite impact on his decisions to escalate in 1965. He felt that the fall of Vietnam would damage his administration and the institution of democracy. (7:242) As a result, he compared the fall of Vietnam to the loss of China:

I knew that Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day the Communists took over China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the rise of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together, were chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam. (7:242)

Johnson's analogy to history, the Vietcong successes in the South, and the attack at Pleiku profoundly influenced his decision to escalate. The recently completed and successful intervention in the Dominican Republic (which he ordered) may have offered hope of a quick settlement in Vietnam. (9:124) Johnson's linkage to past success was also stated as follows: "The challenge that we face today in Southeast Asia, . . . is the same challenge that we have faced with courage and that we have met with strength in Greece and Turkey, in Berlin and Korea, in Lebanon and in Cuba. The 'great lesson of this generation' was that wherever we have stood firm, aggression has ultimately been halted."

(7:238) The preceding past future linkages obviously influenced Johnson's decision to escalate the war in Vietnam.

On the other hand there are other past future linkages that might have argued against his decision. In the Chinese Civil War where the Chiang Kai-Shek government was "inept and corrupt," (9:113) the U. S. had provided limited assistance against the communist Chinese. In Korea, where Syngman Rhee's government was competent, we had sent troops to defend against North Korea and the Chinese. (9:113) A closer examination of these two situations would have revealed that the government in South Vietnam showed the same ineptness (if not more) as did Chiang Kai-Shek's. Consequently, this situation was very different from the situation in Korea. Therefore, while everyone is influenced by his/her view of the "lessons of history," those lessons may or may not be valid.

Counterbalancing National Interests

The decision to escalate was a very delicate and complex situation because it involved several very important competing interests. In September 1964, there were at least four parties, besides Peking and Moscow, which the United States had to influence in any decision to directly pressure Hanoi. (7:250) These parties were "the communists (who must feel strong pressure), the South Vietnamese (whose morale must be buoyed), our allies (who must trust us as 'underwriters'), and the U S public (which must support our risk-taking with U S lives and prestige)." (7:250) The problem here was that any influence on one of these parties could have negative implications on the other. For example, unlimited strategic bombing could modify the North's behavior while simultaneously alienating U. S. public opinion. This factor is even further complicated because 1964 was an election year and a decision to escalate could adversely influence the results. (7:250)

Another counterbalancing interest was that the United States could not afford to appear to lack the resolve to back the friendly government of South Vietnam. The United States eventually believed Vietnam was under the protection of the Southeast Asia Treaty

Organization (SEATO), although Vietnam was not a SEATO member nation. In reality, only Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the United States and the United Kingdom were signatories of this treaty. It provided for consultation in case of hostilities, and nothing more. Moreover, the SEATO countries (minus the United States) had agreed to extend military protection to Vietnam and other countries of Indochina in 1954. (10:262) According to Hartmann and Wendzel: "The United States' obligation to defend South Vietnam did not exist. That did not preclude the United States from doing so; it just did not have to if it did not want to. Congress's action [Tonkin Gulf Resolution] left it up to the President Johnson to decide." (10:262) Thus, several interwoven international and domestic circumstances complicated the decision to escalate the war. Counterbalancing interests partially explain the hesitancy in 1964, and in retrospect the hesitance appears prudent. Later in this paper the nation's domestic concerns and their influence on counterbalancing interests will also be examined.

Third Party Influences

U. S. involvement's in Vietnam and the decision to escalate, provide useful examples of third party influences. The United States strategy of containment was founded upon the premise that the United States had to counter a monolithic communist bloc bent on world domination. Obviously, this premise influenced the Vietnam War from the start with the decision to provide limited assistance to the French during their struggle. U. S. assistance to the French was not free of charge; it served at least two purposes. First, assistance would obtain French support for a European Defense Community against the Soviet Union. Second, French involvement in Vietnam supported U.S. objectives to guard against the domino effect in Asia. A complicating factor in Vietnam is that the United States literally did not know "who or what was being deterred. Impressed by Khrushchev's 'wars of national liberation speech,' the Kennedy administration had at first located the roots of the Vietcong insurgency in Moscow . . . By 1964, though, Peking, not Moscow, had come to

be seen as the culprit. . . ." (7:249-250) Thus the threat of a billion Chinese near the Vietnamese borders simultaneously affected two cardinal principles -- third party influence and past future linkage. The possibility of Chinese entry into the Vietnam war would have serious implications in 1964 and 1965 as had their entrance into the Korean War in 1950. The Soviet Union was another third party that influenced the United States' actions in Vietnam. The Cold War paradigm influenced all of its international policy actions also. Here, too, though, as with past-future linkages, the use of the principle is helpful but does not guarantee a successful outcome. Without a communist "bloc," the third party influence principle would have advised against escalation. That escalation would fail to consider the differences between China and Russia. (10:266-268) As Hartmann and Wendzel point out:

Well before the United States chose to shift to a combat role in 1965, the Chinese were openly quarreling with the Soviets. The foundations for dispute had existed for years in the vast territorial claims Beijing had against Moscow from Tsarist times, disputes over trade and aid, and the Soviets' refusal to help China develop its own nuclear capability. Other factors involved the only lukewarm Soviet support in the 1955 and 1958 crises over the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu, . . . and its support for India *instead of China* in the 1962 Sino-Indian War. But the straws that broke the camel's back, so to speak, were the Soviet "appeasement" of the West in the Cuban missile crisis and the signature the following year of the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. (10:266)

Conservation of Enemies

The decision for limited bombing of North Vietnam was an attempt to conserve enemies. In particular, disapproval of bombing attacks near the Chinese border and limited attacks on possible supply routes from China were efforts to prevent enmity with the PRC. Disapproval of attacks on shipping in Haiphong Harbor was an effort to prevent enmity with the Soviet Union. In the end this conservation of enemies was not enough to deter Johnson's decision to escalate.

Summing up

Given the above situation, why did Johnson decide to escalate? It appears that past future linkages predominated the reasons for escalation. These linkages were founded in the strategy of containment. President Johnson came to office with negligible foreign affairs experience and he inherited an extremely complex international situation in Vietnam. Unwilling to be the first American president "to lose a war," when his experts in the government and the military argued for escalation, Johnson escalated. George Ball, Undersecretary of State, was a significant dissenter to the administration's decision to escalate. Pulitzer Prize winning author Stanley Karnow writes:

A liberal New Deal lawyer, Ball had served on a mission to survey the effects of the Allied bombing of Germany during World War II. The raids, he learned, had barely dented German industry, and he could not imagine that bombing rural North Vietnam would be any more effective. He had also conversed frequently with Charles de Gaulle, who had warned him that the United States was courting the risk of repeating France's tragic experience in Indochina. . . . Now, in the fall of 1964, Ball was acutely worried, and in early October he dictated a sixty-seven-page memorandum--a 'challenge to the assumptions of our current Vietnam policy.' 'Once on the tiger's back, we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount'. . . . (14:420)

Despite George Ball, the train began to roll for escalation in 1964 when influential and learned individuals such as Maxwell Taylor finally favored increased intervention. (7:258) Also, the events of Tonkin Gulf, Pleiku, Bienhoa and the successful Vietcong offensive of 1964 all roughly coincided and served as additional catalysts. Thus, the stage was set. Between February and November 1965, the train was moving so fast for escalation that anyone not on board was run over or left behind.

In February 1965, the president ordered the bombing campaign called Rolling Thunder to counter Vietcong attacks on the U. S. barracks at Qui Nhon. When on March 8, two marine battalions landed at Da Nang, there was no turning back. (2:392) United States policy and strategy were set for Vietnam. For the duration of 1965, escalation

continued. As stated earlier, the president authorized an increase in troop strength up to 219,000 by November. The next section will cover the major events of 1966 and 1967.

Section III

1966-1967 Gradual Escalation

Vietnam and the Great Society": Counterbalancing Interests

The decision to escalate U. S. military involvement in Vietnam resulted from painstaking deliberation within the Johnson Administration. President Johnson, who came from rural Texas, was a proponent of working class people. Despite his political toughness, he had a vision for the United States that included improving the standing of all people. He called this vision the Great Society." Johnson took pride in leading this program that would eventually change the nation's character by ensuring civil rights of minorities, especially blacks. As the successor to John Kennedy, he would help Americans realize their full potential through the Great Society programs. Johnson realized that the war in Vietnam would have broad implications on his ability to execute the Great Society programs. In his book, *The Vantage Point*, Johnson wrote:

The demanding decisions of those trying days relating to Vietnam were decisions involving our nation's integrity and its security. But they also involved what I considered to be the promise of the American future. In a wondrous time of hope and optimism we had begun the building of a better society for our people. The danger that we might have to slow that building, in order to take care of our obligations abroad, brought added anguish. So on that July 27, 1965, two great streams in our national life converged--the dream of a Great Society at home and the inescapable demands of our obligations halfway around the world. They were to run in confluence until the end of my administration. (13:324)

This balance between national security interests represented by Vietnam and the domestic goals of Johnson's Great Society were to be in competition for all of his administration. The convergence of the two great streams," which President Johnson referred to, provides a useful example of how Hartmann and Wendzel's counterbalancing national interests can be expanded to include a nation's domestic concerns. (10:35) The Vietnam War and the Great Society were two counterbalancing national interests and

resulted in the guns and butter approach to national decision making. As an example, the Johnson Administration wanted both a strong military (guns) engaged in Vietnam, and a strong domestic program (butter) back home. In retrospect, the results of the counterbalancing interests were not all bad. Both the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 are landmark pieces of legislation passed despite the Vietnam War. With those two pieces of legislation alone, Johnson's initial ability to balance domestic and foreign policy objectives proved successful. As the war continued to gradually escalate, however, maintaining the balance became more problematic. With this backdrop we will now examine 1966 and 1967.

Waging War

By 1966 the war in Vietnam was gradually escalating. President Johnson approved some but not all Joint Chiefs of Staff requests for increased bombing, and yet, the war continued to expand. When the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign did not have its desired effect, the president increased the target list and number of strikes against North Vietnam. (11:146) According to the noted historian George Herring:

Initiated in early 1965 as much from the lack of alternatives as anything else, the bombing of North Vietnam was expanded over the next two years in the vain hope that it would check infiltration into the south and force North Vietnam to the conference table. . . . Sorties against North Vietnam increased from 25,000 in 1965 to 79,000 in 1966 and 108,000 in 1967; the tonnage of bombs dropped increased from 63,000 to 136,000 to 226,000. . . . From early 1966 on, air strikes were increasingly directed against the North Vietnamese industrial and transportation system and moved steadily northward. (11:146)

The continued bombardment of North Vietnam did not halt its infiltration of the South and did not motivate the North to come to the bargaining table. In fact, official U. S. estimates show that infiltration actually increased from 35,000 men in 1965 to approximately 90,000 in 1967. Just as important, there was no way to measure the

psychological affects of the bombing. It is evident, however, that North Vietnam was not forced to the bargaining table and that it maintained the will to win. To the contrary, the bombing may have provided the motivation North Vietnam needed to galvanize and mobilize its population in support of the war. (11:149) If this is true, the bombing campaign in retrospect appears to have been largely ineffective.

The air campaign was not the only military operation that gradually escalated in 1966. Even before the 1965 buildup was complete, General Westmoreland requested troop strength up to 450,000 by the end of 1966. He received more troops and the freedom to use them. Westmoreland was not forced to live under the same tight controls in waging the ground war as the air campaign. (11:150) As Herring writes, "In June 1966, the President approved a force level of 431,000 to be reached by mid-1967. While these deployments were being approved, Westmoreland was developing requests for an increase to 542,000 troops by the end of 1967. (11:150)

As the air campaign continued to bomb the North, the army and marines continued to prosecute a war of attrition with the enemy. By all accounts, the ground campaign throughout South Vietnam inflicted serious damage to both the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong. In reality, though, both the air and ground strategies were flawed. Herring points out:

An estimated 200,000 North Vietnamese reached draft age each year, and Hanoi was able to replace its losses and match each American escalation. Moreover, the conditions under which the war was fought permitted the enemy to control its losses. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong remained extraordinarily elusive and were generally able to avoid contact when it suited them. They fought at times and places of their own choosing and on ground favorable to them. If losses reached unacceptable levels, they could simply melt away into the jungle or retreat into sanctuaries in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. (11:154)

Despite these results, General Westmoreland and the Joint Chiefs of Staff still pushed to expand the war. In the spring of 1967, still convinced that search and destroy

and attrition warfare could work, General Westmoreland requested and additional 200,000 troops to intensify the ground war. (11:176)

The Home Front

Public support for the war in Vietnam began to decline in 1967, for several reasons. In 1967, the United States drafted 30,000 Americans every month to meet the ever increasing need for military manpower. In addition, by the summer of 1967, 13,000 Americans had lost their lives in Vietnam. Those precious American lives had been lost with very little to show for the sacrifice. Moreover, it was expensive, and President Johnson had even proposed a 10 percent surcharge to cover the war's increasing costs. Many of America's daily newspapers that had formerly supported the war were now in opposition. Public approval for Johnson's handling of the war had declined to 28 percent by October of 1967. (11:174) According to George Herring:

By late 1967, for many observers the war had become the visible symbol of a malaise that had afflicted all of American society. Not all would have agreed with [William] Fulbright's assertion that the Great Society was a sick society, but many did feel that the United States was going through a kind of national nervous breakdown. The credibility gap --the difference between what the administration said and what it did--had produced a pervasive distrust of government. Rioting in the cities, a spiraling crime rate, and noisy demonstrations in the streets suggested that violence abroad had produced violence at home. Increasingly divided against itself, the nation appeared on the verge of an internal crisis as severe as the Great Depression of the 1930s. Anxiety about the war had not translated into a firm consensus for either escalation or withdrawal, but the public mood--tired, angry, and frustrated--perhaps posed a more serious threat to the administration than the antiwar movement. (11:175)

Public opposition to the war was a key factor in setting the national agenda regarding Vietnam. Dissension and acrimony plagued the public debate over Vietnam. Dissension also existed within the United States government over Vietnam. The CIA continued to publish reports that the ground and air wars were not going well. General

Westmoreland, on the other hand, continued to insist that the war was going well and could be won. Moreover, restrictions imposed by the president on the bombing campaign and his refusal to activate the reserves, dissatisfied the Joint Chiefs of Staff. (11:175) As Herring points out, Westmoreland had been given considerable leeway in implementing ground operations, but he keenly resented what he later described as the 'naive, gratuitous advice' he constantly received from the 'self-appointed field marshals' in the State and Defense Departments, and he was greatly frustrated by the restrictions which forbade him from pursuing the enemy into its sanctuaries. (11:175-176)

By July 1967, President Johnson concluded that he needed to increase United States troop strength in Vietnam to 525,000. To bolster public support at home, Johnson decided to send Clark Clifford and Maxwell Taylor to Asia to obtain increased Asian support for the war and arrange a summit. Clark Clifford's memoirs reveal that during this trip, the Asian countries (Australia, New Zealand, Korea, Thailand, and Singapore) had no desire to increase their support for the war. On an unscheduled maintenance stopover in the Philippines, Clifford remarked that President Marcos did not even acknowledge their presence. These countries had problems within their own borders and getting increased support for the war was not possible. It was during this trip that Clifford finally realized that the domino theory was not a critical concern among Asian nations. (5:448-452) According to Clifford, After my trip to Southeast Asia, I was not entirely surprised: It seemed, as someone joked at the time, as if the Asians were ready to fight in Vietnam to the last American. (5:451)

There was to be no summit of Asian nations in 1967 or 1968 on Vietnam, and none of the countries agreed to step up their participation in the war. The simple fact is that these nations did not see their vital interests threatened by the events in Vietnam. If these countries did not see the domino threat to their vital interests, to many in the United States the threat was even more remote. Ironically, when Clifford returned to Washington he reached a very interesting conclusion presented to Johnson as follows:

If we continue the war at the same level of ground and air effort . . . I am unable to see that it will bring us any nearer to our goal. A year from now we will once again be taking stock, and we may well be no nearer our objectives than we are today. . . . No one needed to be reminded that a year hence we would also be in a Presidential campaign. I found no concern anywhere in Asia, . . . that the Chinese might enter the war, and there was the same reaction to the possibility of the Soviets entering. There seems to be no diminution of Hanoi's will to continue the war. If we are to have a chance to get this war over with, we must hit them harder. (5:452)

This advice from Clark Clifford is a paradox. He witnessed Asian reluctance to provide additional support for Vietnam and their failure to see the Vietnam War as a threat to their vital interests. Just as important, he knew the Asians did not share the United States' concerns about the "domino theory" in Asia. Moreover, he concluded that the United States could not prevail in Vietnam, given the existing military and political situations. This point is crucial because Clifford's logic somehow brought him to the conclusion that the United States needed to increase its war effort in Vietnam. Clark Clifford understood that (at least from the Asian perspective) the domino theory rationale for being in Vietnam was not valid and yet he advised for escalation. To a large extent, past future linkages and their relationship to the domino theory in Asia was the basis for U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Clark Clifford, a trusted presidential advisor, knew that the Asian leaders did not subscribe to this approach and yet he did not suggest a change to the president. As it turns out, the paradigm and the past future linkages were too strong for him to question. In Clark Clifford's own words, I had returned from my trip to Asia with two points of view that were seemingly contradictory. On one hand, the trip had buried for me, once and for all, Washington's treasured domino theory; on the other hand, I continued to support the policy because it seemed to provide the best way out of the war. I had not yet reached the point where I could see that at the end of this particular tunnel there simply was no light--but serious doubts had been sown. (5:452)

Decision Making

This points out the extremely difficult situation the Johnson Administration faced in making Vietnam policy. Contradictions were everywhere and every choice had its own set of implications. Graham T. Allison has postulated three models for decision making, two of which are the rational actor model and the bureaucratic politics model. (1:5-9) The rational actor model suggests that national decision making be focused and centralized among key high level "rational" actors making rational decisions based on single rational choices. This construct is especially applicable during crises such as the Cuban Missile Crisis. In this crisis President Kennedy employed a group of fifteen trusted advisors who eventually helped him reach the decision to blockade Cuba. (1:57) The bureaucratic politics model, on the other hand, as the name suggests, involves many more actors and organizations in the national decision making process. The bureaucratic politics model would therefore require more time to accommodate the national, interagency, and congressional debate likely to result from the decision making process. In this model rather than a single rational choice, each organization sees the choice from its own political and internal perspective. (1:144) This would suggest that to obtain increased consensus for a decision, given the luxury of time, the bureaucratic politics model would be the most effective.

Lyndon Johnson used a modified rational actor model of decision making during the Vietnam War. He had a small group of official advisors from within government that he met with during his Tuesday luncheons. This group was his trusted group of advisors who had access and influence. According to Hartmann and Wendzel:

Johnson made his most important decisions and received his most influential advice *outside* the NSC, [National Security Council] using the Tuesday Lunch as his key decision forum. Besides the president, regular attendees included Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and usually the DCI, the CJCS, and the national security adviser, plus the

president's press secretary. Others with particular expertise might be invited if the president desired . . . The debate took place within a commonly accepted set of policy assumptions like containment and the domino theory. Once Johnson and his advisers became preoccupied with Vietnam, a siege mentality set in, and the advisory channels constricted even further.

(10:161)

The Johnson decision making style, because of its reliance on a small group of advisors, isolated the president. According to the Allison model, Johnson used the rational actor approach of decision making although the Vietnam situation was not a short-term crisis. This had the effect of limiting the president's exposure to the different national agendas. Most important, his decision making style largely excluded the interagency process and the exchange of ideas that occur between bureaucracies and their staffs. Because of this, Johnson was isolated from counterbalancing national interests--that was a critical failing. (10:161) Just as important, there was little opposition to the Vietnam War from within the group of trusted advisors, further restricting Johnson's exposure to differing ideas on handling the Vietnam War.

But with public and congressional opposition growing, in November 1967, President Johnson assembled a group of elder statesmen to advise him on the Vietnam War. This group, called the "wise men," was a shift away from the Tuesday Luncheon approach to policy making. The group chaired by Clifford, included Dean Acheson, Omar Bradley, George Ball, McGeorge Bundy, Arthur Dean, Douglas Dillon, Abe Fortas, and Robert Murphy from outside government. It also included Averell Harriman, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Maxwell Taylor from within government. (5:454)

This group initially advised Johnson that he should stand firm on his position in Vietnam. George Ball, a former Undersecretary of State, was still a notable dissenter. He had opposed United States involvement in Vietnam in 1964 and he continued his opposition in November 1967. According to Ball, I made my usual plea for extrication to the usual deaf ears; the war, said the other members of the group, must be vigorously pursued. The

major problem, they superciliously asserted, was how to educate American opinion."

(2:407)

Nevertheless, this virtual unanimity of the president's advisors was important now because Robert McNamara changed his position on the war on November 1, 1967. The group's unanimity offset McNamara's newly revealed opposition. (5:455-456) After McNamara's new position was known, Johnson's only choice was to replace him. Johnson eventually removed McNamara delicately by offering him the presidency of the World Bank, a position McNamara had long coveted. (5:459) The important result, however, is that the November 1967 meeting of the "wise men" strengthened the president's resolve toward continued involvement in Vietnam, even though McNamara had changed his mind.

Summing Up

This was the backdrop for the policy decisions President Johnson faced during the period between 1966 and 1967. The period of incrementalism and gradual escalation is complex and filled with contradictions. I have attempted to describe the policy considerations of the war by providing a look into the decision making process. Foreign and domestic factors obviously complicated the decision making process. Clearly the counterbalancing interests of containment of communism internationally and the Great Society Programs domestically required difficult choices. William Westmoreland writes in *A Soldier Reports*:

Influencing many of the major decisions was an almost paranoid fear of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union and a corresponding anxiety over active participation by Chinese Communist troops. On those matters the President's advisers took undue council [sic] of their fears . . . President Johnson's policy of guns and butter--pursuit of the Great Society --also exerted a strong influence. It further limited the President's strategic options, and it virtually foreordained the kind of long war that democracies are ill-prepared to sustain. (16:411)

General Westmoreland identifies another factor that needs to be considered in the examination of the period of gradual escalation--the national character. With the United States penchant for quick, clean and decisive military action, it is no wonder that the Vietnam War lost the support of the American People. American leaders should not overlook this national character when committing military forces.

Westmoreland also suggests Johnson's attempt to conserve enemies (Soviet Union and China) unduly restricted his military decisions regarding targeting in Vietnam and the use of decisive military force. In addition, Johnson's past-future linkages, remembering China's intervention in the Korean War, influenced these decisions. The containment of communism and the domino theory dominated United States strategic thinking even when there was evidence to suggest that they should not--as Clark Clifford's Asia trip of July 1967 pointed out.

Finally, President Johnson's reliance on small groups of advisors seems to have clouded his political judgment and isolated him from counterbalancing national interests. According to Westmoreland, When dissent developed in 1966 and 1967, he [Johnson] would have been well advised to have gone back to the Congress for reaffirmation of the commitment to South Vietnam, . . . Given the American system of congressional elections every two years, a long undeclared war was bound to become a political issue. President Johnson with his normally keen appreciation for politics should have anticipated that and should have forced the Congress to face its constitutional responsibility for waging war.

(16:412) Given Johnson's congressional experience and his skill at consensus building, his reliance on the small group of advisors and the resulting isolation is difficult to understand. However, old paradigms are as hard to break as old habits. To this day even as the United States grapples with its role in the Post-Cold War period, there remain substantial vestiges of the old paradigm. For example, U. S. military planning, programming, and budgeting has remained largely unchanged in the years since 1991. In addition, the military force

structure today is largely a smaller version of the Cold War force structure. Given today's slowness in departing from the old paradigm, it is easier to understand the difficulties President Johnson faced in 1967. As the next section will show bureaucratic politics begin to dominate in the following year. Also covered is the Tet Offensive and the huge implications for the United States and the Johnson Administration.

Section IV

The 1968 Tet Offensive and Johnson's Decision

The Cauldron

By the end of 1967, United States troop strength in Vietnam was approaching 500,000, with an increase of nearly 100,000 in 1967 alone. Nine thousand Americans died on the battlefields of Vietnam that year bringing the total deaths for 1966 and 1967 to over 15,000. Internally, as mentioned earlier, the administration had become divided on Vietnam, particularly with Robert McNamara's change of position on the war. Politically, the introduction of a new and popular critic--Robert Kennedy--frustrated and further isolated Johnson. (14:524-525) According to Stanley Karnow:

Johnson feared and loathed the Kennedys. Now, Bobby had become a strident critic of the war--and, worse yet, his switch was paying off. A poll of presidential potentialities conducted in July 1967 showed Kennedy trailing Johnson by 39 percent to 45 percent; a survey in October showed Kennedy ahead by a margin of 20 percent. In Johnson's eyes, the logic of the situation was crystal clear: Kennedy had persuaded his intimate friend McNamara to turn against the war--which meant, quite plainly, that McNamara had been persuaded to double-cross Johnson. (14:524-525).

By January 1968, pessimism characterized the mood in the United States because of increasing dissatisfaction with United States involvement in Vietnam. Universities became a focal point for protests against the Johnson Administration's handling of the war. To further complicate the situation, the media had now taken a more active stance against the war. According to George Herring, A once compliant media was [sic] abandoning its role as accomplice in the national security state for its more traditional role as adversary. (12:149)

Many factors contributed to the volatile national cauldron that brewed regarding United States' involvement. The Johnson Administration could no longer predict victory in Vietnam to the American people. Herring points out:

[T]he key, as some officials recognized in the beginning, was not the skill of their public relations activities but visible evidence of success for our efforts to defeat the Viet Cong, deter Hanoi, and . . . bring peace to the Vietnamese countryside." As late as the end of 1967, the hard sell campaign based on perceptions of progress bought some time, suggesting the ability of the executive branch even under the most adverse circumstances to sway the public. The shock of the Tet offensive ended all that, forcing on the administration a whole new set of even more intractable problems. (12:150)

Tet Fractures the Paradigm

Charged with domestic and international explosiveness, the political cauldron continued to brew in the United States in late 1967. The Domino Theory Paradigm had to this point been strong enough to justify United States involvement. The Tet Offensive of 1968, which lasted some twenty five days, began to fracture that paradigm. On the 30th of January 1968, the Vietcong attacked the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. Across all of urban South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong launched a simultaneous and coordinated attack. U. S. forces subsequently repulsed the attack on the U. S. Embassy in Saigon and killed all of the Vietcong intruders after six hours of fighting. The results were the same across all of Vietnam. Both the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong suffered tactical defeats. (11:186)

Although Tet was a tactical defeat for the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong, it was a decisive strategic victory. General Vo Nguyen Giap's tactical defeat achieved an important strategic objective. As Bernard Brodie has observed, . . . the Tet Offensive was 'probably unique in that the side that lost completely in the tactical sense came away with an overwhelming psychological and hence political victory.' Tet had a tremendous impact in the United States and ushered in a new phase of a seemingly endless war. (11:187)

Tet's impact on Washington caught the Johnson Administration off guard. The attack prompted President Johnson to assign Dean Acheson the task of conducting an independent study of the war. Acheson conducted the study as directed and reached the conclusion that the United States could not win without a maximum commitment of U.S. forces. Even with a commitment of this size, Acheson concluded that the war could go on for five more years. (2:407) That was not all that Acheson told Johnson. According to George Ball, Acheson further told Johnson, [t]he country, . . . was no longer behind the Administration, nor did Americans any longer believe what the President was telling them. Then, during the next few months, Clark Clifford, the newly appointed Secretary of Defense, accumulated mounting evidence that the war could not be won. (2:407) At this

time, General Westmoreland had requested 206,000 additional troops. Clifford then asked Johnson to convene his wise men for another conference. (2:407)

On March 25, 1968 President Johnson assembled his group of wise men again in an always present attempt to obtain consensus. This time, however, the results were much different from the results of the meeting held in November 1967. Dean Acheson now told the president that the United States could not achieve success in Vietnam by military means. McGeorge Bundy now agreed with George Ball and advised Johnson against continued bombing of North Vietnam. His rationale was that the bombing was doing more to erode support on the home front than it was influencing the North Vietnamese. (2:408)

Within five months, the "wise men" had reversed their positions with the same evidence available to them in November 1967. The key difference however, is that Tet had broken the group's isolation and forced the president to see counterbalancing interests.

Summing Up

On March 31, 1968, six days after meeting with his wise men," President Lyndon Baines Johnson made a television address which will go down in history. In the address he announced to the American people that he would unilaterally halt the bombing of North Vietnam north of 19 degrees latitude. He further said that the remaining limited bombing of North Vietnam would stop if Hanoi showed restraint. (2:409) This was a radical departure from the position of the administration that had existed up to this point. An even more significant component of the speech was that Johnson would not seek the nomination of his party for the presidency in 1968. The Johnson Administration would end and the Vietnam War was a significant cause of that end. Specifically, the Tet Offensive was the catalyst for the significant fracture of the domino theory paradigm, and the fatal rupture in the life of the Johnson Administration.

The Tet Offensive helped destroy a flawed national strategy. The strategy no longer had the support of the American people or influential Americans in and outside

government. According to George Ball, the Tet Offensive provided President Johnson with a way to get out Vietnam that had previously eluded him. Ball writes: Though I knew President Johnson desperately wanted to get us out of Vietnam, he was incapable of it. His Administration had accumulated too much baggage of past statements and actions, too many fixed ideas, and too many positions it could not easily reverse. But by taking himself out of the Presidential race, Lyndon Johnson had paved the way for America's extrication, and I hoped our Vietnamese nightmare might soon be over. (2:409)

Using this rationale, perhaps the Tet Offensive helped the United States by opening the path toward de-escalation and eventual withdrawal from Vietnam. The tragedy is that more than 50,000 American lives were the eventual price for the experience.

Section V

Conclusion

As this essay has pointed out, containment of Communism and the Domino Theory were the major reasons why the Johnson Administration decided to escalate the Vietnam War in 1964. Past future linkages or the administration's view of history bolstered the Containment Theory. In addition, the administration's view of third party influences and the need for conservation of enemies guided escalation decisions.

Counterbalancing national interests were present from 1964 to 1968 and seem to have dominated in the closing months of the Johnson Administration. The Tet Offensive and the resulting public/congressional concerns highlighted the conflict and incompatibilities of the "guns and butter" counterbalancing interests. The Tet Offensive highlighted Vietnam specifically, but there were many other problems facing the nation at this time. To illustrate, two weeks before and after the Tet Offensive, the Johnson Administration dealt with many problems on both the international and domestic scene. President Johnson writes in his memoirs:

In Korea an assassination squad of North Koreans sneaked into Seoul intending to murder South Korea's President Park. The attempt was broken up only at the last minute. Then the North Koreans seized one of our intelligence ships, the USS *Pueblo*, and imprisoned its crew. Two days later, on January 25, we called up more than 14,000 Navy and Air Force reserves to strengthen our position in Korea without diverting resources from Southeast Asia. Our Korean allies were seriously worried that the Pyongyang regime might launch another invasion of their country. There was a distinct possibility that South Korean forces might be withdrawn from Vietnam. In addition, we had received intelligence reports that a crisis might develop around West Berlin. We also faced major financial problems. The last three months of 1967 had produced the largest deficit in our balance of payments since 1950. Our proposal for a tax bill was bottled up in Congress. The international monetary system was in danger. At the same time, I was trying to push my domestic program. I submitted my Economic Report to the Congress on February 1 and followed it with a program of major legislation in education, crime prevention, and consumer protection. It was

against this background that we had to deal with the Tet offensive and its consequences. (13:385)

Clearly, many factors affected the United States involvement in Vietnam during this period. Despite the specific factors, it is crucial to recognize the importance of the underlying assumptions or paradigms that governed United States involvement. This essay identified Containment of Communism and the Domino Theory as cornerstones of the United States paradigm in Vietnam. According to Larry Berman, The documents show that the principals accepted containment of communism and the domino theory as basic premises for formulating policy and not as a hypothesis for analysis. Moreover, the principals approached the problem definition stage with twenty years of intellectual baggage shaped by visions of Soviet-inspired and aggressive communism. There was almost Talmudic adherence to the containment strategy outlined by George Kennan. . . .

(3:130) Were the underlying assumptions valid and were they continually reassessed?

Berman goes on to say:

"Early on, American leadership mistakenly believed Vietnam to be vital not only for itself, but for what they thought its loss would mean internationally and domestically. Once the commitment was made, each subsequent president reaffirmed the commitment rather than reassessing the basic rationale as to whether vital US interests were involved or not. The cognitive error was not Johnson's alone. Six postwar presidents and their advisors refused to think critically about the changing nature of Asian communism. (3:131)

The value of asking the question lies in the process of answering the question. A significant lesson of Vietnam is not so much the reasons and rationale for United States involvement. That is not to reduce the historical significance of those reasons, for they are important. The real lesson comes from examining the process and recognizing that paradigms do change. In Vietnam there was evidence that supported the need for a paradigm change in mid-1967. It took the Tet Offensive of 1968 to expose the evidence. Unfortunately, the U. S. remained involved in Vietnam until 1975 despite the evidence.

The United States is still attempting to break the Cold War Paradigm as it executes its strategy of Engagement and Enlargement. The Johnson Administration did not have the luxury of witnessing the end of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall. From that perspective, the decisions made in the period from 1964 to 1968 can be placed in a more meaningful context. Strategies and policies must be founded on assumptions. Although the assumptions may not be correct, that was not the primary policy error in Vietnam. The primary error was in not reassessing the assumptions to ensure continued viability, whether they initially had been correct, or not. Unfortunately, the Tet Offensive of 1968 forced such a reassessment.

Finally, a personal note: This essay has been a pleasure to write, for many reasons. This period of American history will always have a special place in my mind and heart because it is the first American war that I remember. It is a war that produced many American heroes and yet most Americans did not recognize those heroes. To those who have not experienced war, I cannot begin to describe the feelings of coming home to a grateful nation. I had those feelings when I returned from the Gulf War. Consequently I share the sorrow of those brave men and women who came home from Vietnam and met with hate and contempt. Those men and women will always have my respect and admiration. The over 50,000 Americans who did not come home from Vietnam have an even more special place in my mind and heart. They made the ultimate sacrifice for their country, and they will never be forgotten.

List of References

1. Allison, Graham T. Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1971.
2. Ball, George W. The Past Has Another Pattern. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982.
3. Berman, Larry. Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982.
4. Cable, Larry. Unholy Grail: The US and the wars in Vietnam 1965-8. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.
5. Clifford, Clark. Counsel to the President. New York: Random House, 1991.
6. Cohen, Steven. Vietnam: Anthology and Guide to A Television History. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983.
7. Gaddis, John Lewis. Strategies of Containment. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
8. Gaddis, John Lewis. The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947. New York: Columbia University Press, 1972.
9. Gelb, Leslie H. with Richard K. Betts. The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked. Washington D. C.: Brookings Institution, 1979.
10. Hartmann, Frederick H. and Robert L. Wendzel. America's Foreign Policy in a Changing World. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1994.
11. Herring, George C. America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 2nd ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986.
12. Herring, George C. LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.
13. Johnson, Lyndon Baines. The Vantage Point, Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.
14. Karnow, Stanley. Vietnam: A History. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.
15. Sheehan, Neil, Hedrick Smith, E. W. Kenworthy and Fox Butterfield. The Pentagon Papers. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1971.
16. Westmoreland, William E. A Soldier Reports. Publisher and date published not listed.

Appendix Cardinal Principles

Past-Future Linkages. A parties' decision about the present will be influenced by their views of the past. This is especially true when evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of an alternative and where the choice of one alternative will lead.

Counterbalancing National Objectives. Two major alternatives in important but controversial foreign policy decisions often seem of equal value and to some extent run counter to or balance the other. Alternatives have both pluses and minuses and potential changes in the international system can often be understood by looking at the advantages and disadvantages of what a state has not yet chosen to do, but might.

Third-party Influences. No relationship between international states is totally bilateral. There are always other states (parties) who may be affected or who may help shape a particular decision on the part of another state.

Conservation of Enemies. The enmity faced by a nation is variable and can be controlled, modified, increased or reduced. Specifically, making a decision which keeps the number of enemies to a minimum.

Source: Hartmann and Wendzel's, American Foreign Policy in a Changing World.

New Text Document.txt

19 AUGUST 97

This paper was downloaded from the Internet.

Distribution Statement A: Approved for public release;
distribution is unlimited.

POC:

AIR WAR COLLEGE
AIR UNIVERSITY
MAXWELL AFB, AL 36112

gf